

## **THE POWER AND WISDOM OF GOD**

### **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

**August 28, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist, Birmingham**

*God is dead.* This was the conclusion of Friedrich Nietzsche, acclaimed German philosopher and one of the most influential atheists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Nietzsche, this slogan was not a proclamation that the living God was dead (by definition, this would be to admit that there is a God, which an atheist denies) but that the concept of God was no longer needed to explain the origins of universe and all that exists. One of Nietzsche's fundamental contentions was that traditional values (represented primarily by Christianity) had lost their power in the lives of individuals. He was convinced that traditional values (Christian values) represented a "slave morality," a morality created by weak and resentful individuals who encouraged such behavior as gentleness and kindness because the behavior served their interests. Nietzsche claimed that new values could be created to replace the traditional ones, and his discussion of the possibility led to his concept of the superman. He maintained that all human behavior is motivated by the will to power. Such power is manifested in the superman's *independence, creativity, and originality*. For Nietzsche, the ultimate goal in life was to triumph over weakness, but for him this could never be accomplished through God who was nothing more than a mere wish fulfillment of man's imagination. Although Nietzsche explicitly denied that any supermen had yet arisen, he mentioned several individuals who could serve as models. Among these models he lists Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Napoleon I, and Jesus Christ.

Nietzsche's philosophical view was not new in and of itself. In fact, this view has existed since the beginning of time in the hearts and minds of all who suppress the truth of God. Nietzsche simply further expressed a worldview of a mind without God, a worldview resting on human reason alone without divine revelation. He was, however, somewhat on target in his assessment that the ultimate goal in life was to triumph over weakness. But as we will see in our text this morning, that *triumph over weakness has been accomplished through the power and wisdom of God at the cross.*

#### **I. God's Power and Wisdom Discerned through the Cross (1:18-21)**

Many of you know how much I enjoy watching football, and I emphasize *watching*. I could never be a football coach. I don't know a 54 Pitch from a 41 Slant from an X-over. However, even with my limited knowledge of the finer points of the game I often find myself making a judgment concerning a coach's choice of a play. Even though I do not have or know the mind of the coach I sometimes question the coaches wisdom. More often than not, however, a play that I would look at and question, based on my limited knowledge of the game, is a play that is called by the coach, who has much greater knowledge of the game than I, to set up another play later in the game which inevitably goes for a big play. And then I sit there and wonder, "How did that work?"

We all make judgment calls every day in every arena of life. We must make decisions based upon what we see and know. Sometimes these decisions are simple, sometimes they are difficult; sometimes we make the right call, sometimes we make an error in judgment. This is the nature of discernment. Discernment is defined as *the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure.*

In our text we see two distinct groups of people that view the cross in two entirely different ways based upon their *ability* to grasp and comprehend what is obscure, on their ability to be able to properly discern the purpose and the message of the cross. All of mankind falls into one of these two groups. To which do you belong?

### 1. Those who are perishing – foolishness

The Corinthians looked at the gospel as a simplistic philosophic worldview, lacking in depth of wisdom. For them it might be a topic discussion and perhaps even a subject to contemplate. However for Paul, the gospel was to be much more than discussed – it was to be proclaimed. It was to be set forth as God’s truth and therefore proclaimed with certainty. The gospel is **“the word”** or **“message of the cross,”** not *a* word about *a* cross. The content of the gospel is singular. It is **“the word,”** not just any word, concerning **“the cross,”** not just any cross. This message, this word, concerns the person and work of Jesus Christ alone for salvation of sinners from the wrath of God. There are not two gospels – the gospel is distinct. Paul warned the Galatians, “If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received (the gospel), let him be . . . *congratulated? . . . given the Nobel Prize for Philosophic Discovery?* No, let them be *accursed*, damned (Galatians 1:9).

However, human wisdom rejects the truth of the gospel. To **“those who are perishing”** it is unnecessary. It speaks to things of which they have no concern. Simply put, the message of the gospel is boring. And so they reject the message out of hand, they regard it as foolish. This is because the message of the cross is not something that can be properly discerned by human reason alone. Human wisdom alone, with all of its philosophical reasoning and technological advances leads to nowhere – it leads to God is dead! Sin has so scarred the human mind and so corrupted the human heart that man left to himself cannot find God.

We see this plainly in Romans 1. There, Paul attests that God has demonstrated His power and majesty in His creation and that man should be able to find God and that they are without excuse for failing to do so. Why? Because, “That which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:19-20). But what does human wisdom do with this truth? They suppress it; they “profess themselves to be wise” (Romans 1:22) and they “do not see fit to acknowledge God any longer” (Romans 1:28). God is dead.

With this in mind, it should not surprise us that **“the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”** Just as they are unable by reason alone to properly discern the truth and magnificence of the Creator they are unable to properly discern the truth of the gospel. And in doing so they bring judgment upon themselves, they are condemned already.

### 2. Those who are being saved – power of God

It might surprise us that in showing the folly of human wisdom Paul here uses the word **“power”** rather than wisdom. He speaks of God’s wisdom over against human wisdom later in the text, but here he speaks of **“the power of God.”** This, of course, is by design. Paul did not want these at Corinth to think that the gospel that had taken effect in the lives of **“those who are being saved”** was simply one more thought to be added to their already large heap of philosophical speculations. As D.A. Carson notes,

Paul does not want the Corinthians to think that the gospel is nothing more than a philosophical system, a supremely wise system that stands over against the folly of

others. It is far more: where wisdom utterly fails to deal with human need, God himself has taken action. [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 15]

The word or message of the cross is the power of God to those who are being saved, to those who have received and have the finished work of the cross applied in their lives. They have properly discerned that which is true about the cross of Christ. But why? Why, at some point in the life of the believer does he shun the wisdom of the world? Why does the Christian, who once was at enmity with God and chasing after the desires of his own heart suddenly drop everything, renounce the ways of the world and follow Christ? Why do they see the gospel as **“the power of God”** and not as **“foolishness”**? Is it simply because Paul said so? Of course not! It is because God by His power has enlightened or illuminated their reason. They have what the wisdom of the world lacks and that is *divine revelation*. God in His grace and mercy has chosen to reveal Himself in a special way to those who know Him. He has revealed Himself fully and finally in His Word and shown Himself most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. Those who believe the gospel is **“the power of God”** believe because God has enabled them to do so. Again, hear Carson regarding the power of God:

We are impotent when it comes to dealing with our sin and being reconciled to God, but where we are impotent God is powerful. Human folly and human wisdom are equally unable to achieve what God has accomplished in the cross. The gospel is not simply good advice, nor is it good news about God’s power. The gospel is God’s power to those who believe. The place where God has supremely destroyed all human arrogance and pretension is the cross. [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 15]

Paul demonstrated this truth (that God has destroyed arrogance and pretension at the cross) in v. 19 of our text. Here Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 as a reminder of the already proclaimed truth of God’s power and wisdom – **“For it is written, ‘I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.’”** Isaiah’s prophecy was towards the godless leaders of Judah who, in their wisdom, thought they could counter Assyria’s aggression towards them through an alliance with Egypt. The “wisdom” of Hezekiah’s advisors was the same as that which was manifesting itself in the leadership at Corinth. Paul here uses the Isaiah passage to remind them that God would continue to act against this godless wisdom as he had in the past. When and where did this occur? When did God **“DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE”**? Where did God set side **“THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER”**? At the cross! The cross is the great leveler. The cross is the great divider. At the cross God simply did what He said He was going to do. At the cross of Christ the power and wisdom of God are displayed so that no man can ever say that God is unjust. It is at the cross where God displayed His Son Jesus Christ publicly as satisfaction for our sins (Romans 3:25a). It is at the cross where God demonstrates His righteousness, passing over sins previously committed (Romans 3:25b). It is at the cross where God is both just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). Oh how deep is His wisdom and how great is His power!

With this in mind, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions in v. 20. **“Where is the wise man?** Where are those who think they have it all figured out? Where are your great scientists that have such a wealth of knowledge? Where are those that have convinced you that this word of the cross is foolish? **Where is the scribe?** Where is the scholar of the law? What answer does he give you for your sin? What does he tell you about eternity and judgment? What good can a lawyer do for you in God’s divine courtroom? **Where is the debater of this age?** Where is the great orator, the silver-tongued, slick-sounding peddler of virtues who looks and sounds

good? Where are they and what answer do they have about the nature of God and forgiveness of sin? In the face of the cross the schemes of these men is futile.

So what are we to glean from this? Simply this: the world in its wisdom has it all wrong! God is not foolish; the world in its wisdom is foolish. The truth of the matter is that **“God (at the cross) has made foolish the wisdom of the world” (v. 20)**. How has he accomplished this? How has God **“made foolish the wisdom of the world”**? Look at v. 21.

First, the world is incapable of coming to God on their own because God will not allow them to do so. **“For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God.”** Not only did these wise men and scribes and debaters of the age get it all wrong, it is actually God who worked it out that way. God in His divine wisdom and sovereignty would not allow these men to know Him according to their philosophical worldviews. He chose, according to His divine prerogative, not to reveal Himself to them. We see this clearly described by Paul in the text Chris read earlier in 2 Corinthians 4, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (4:4-5). They are blinded by their own wisdom from the light of the gospel, and God alone can remove the veil.

Second, it is **“through the foolishness of the message preached,”** not the wisdom of the world, that men are saved, and this is well pleasing to God. Notice Paul does not say here that preaching is foolish in and of itself. Foolish preaching saves no one! But it is the content of the message preached, the gospel message itself that the *world* deems to be foolish, that is the power of God for salvation. And so God has ordained that salvation comes through the proclamation of His wisdom of the saving gospel and not by the advent of some philosophical system of man.

So we see two ways of discerning the gospel. One according to human wisdom, relying on its reason alone, which sees it as foolish, and the other according to God’s revealed wisdom which is declared to be the power of God. Both think they are right. Scripture says that only one is right. Which do you believe – man’s wisdom or God’s wisdom? How do you discern the message of the cross? As foolish, heaping judgment upon yourself, or as the power of God for salvation to all who believe?

## **II. God’s Power and Wisdom Displayed at the Cross (1:22-25)**

Paul did not allow the foolishness or the sway of the world’s wisdom effect his message. As we saw last week in v. 17, Paul reminded the Corinthians that the gospel alone was the focus of his preaching and this gospel did not need his help in making it more palatable to the wisdom of the world nor did he need to dress it up to make it more appealing. To do so would be to rob the gospel of its centerpiece, which is the cross of Christ. Here he crystallizes this thought. Just in case they missed it the first time, just in case they read over it too quickly in their morning devotion, just in case they did not quite grasp what he was trying to get across to them, he boils it down as simply and yet as profoundly as he possibly can: **“We preach Christ crucified” (v. 23)**. Paul understood, as the true believer understands, that it is at the cross that God’s power and wisdom fully and finally triumphed over the self-professed wisdom and self-propagating power of the world. It is at the cross, in Christ’s person and in His work alone, that God’s power and wisdom were most mightily displayed.

As you might expect, this message faced stern opposition. But this should not surprise us. If the world in its wisdom rejected the Messiah in person, having Him slaughtered on this very cross which became the centerpiece of God’s power and wisdom (all, by the way, according to

the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, Acts 2:23) then we should expect that the world would naturally reject the message of the Savior of the cross. Here Paul gives the response of the world to Christ and the gospel.

### 1. The religious

The Jews were God's chosen people. It was to the Jews that God had entrusted the Scriptures of the Old Testament and the Law; He entered into covenant with them alone; they were the recipients of the promises contained in the covenant. And yet they still would not trust God!

Our text tells us that the Jews **“asked for signs.”** This was nothing new for the Jews. They were notorious sign-chasers. Their motto was “evidence that demands a verdict.” And yet it would not matter how many **“signs”** Jesus gave them, they would continue to ask for more signs. These signs were a plea from the Jews for Christ to display His power. And each time He would perform a miracle, they would ask Him to verify His power again. One of these particular instances we find in the gospels. Matthew (Matthew 12:38), Mark (8:11) and John (6:30) wrote that after the feeding of the four thousand the Jews requested a sign from heaven that would verify Christ's miracle. However Jesus continually refused to give them a sign and told them that they would receive no sign but the sign of Jonah the prophet (Mt. 12:39-40, 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). Jesus knew their hearts; Jesus knew the underlying reason for these requests. The reason for these requests was that the Jews were not looking for a spiritual Messiah that would deliver them from the bondage of their sins, but they were looking for a political Messiah that would deliver them from the bondage enacted on them by Rome. Therefore, their requests for **“signs”** were that He might verify His credentials, that He might prove that He was in fact the Messiah. They would believe Him if He would only become their miracle worker on demand. However, when the greatest miracle in the history of the world happened in the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (the very sign of Jonah that He promised) they missed it. Why? Because they had a wrong view concerning Jesus Christ as Messiah and their own need for a Savior. At the cross, God displayed His power in a way that is indescribable, and in the resurrection He demonstrated His power in a way that is indefinable and triumphed over Satan, sin, and death.

What was the Jews response to Paul's message of Christ crucified? It was **“a stumbling block,”** (v. 23) literally, scandalous. A crucified Messiah was an oxymoron for a Jew. It was unthinkable that Jesus could be the Messiah since He was dead, especially in the way that He died, by crucifixion on a cross. This belief came from their own Scripture:

Deut. 21:22-23: If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

D.A. Carson wrote, “‘Crucified Messiah’: this juxtaposition of words is only a whisker away from blasphemy” [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 22] for the Jew. So the Jew, who continued to look for signs and viewed the gospel as the ultimate scandal missed the truth of Galatians 3:13, that Jesus on the tree was accursed of God, he became a curse *for us* and in doing so redeemed us from the curse of the Law. The curse of the Law remains on all, who, like the Jews here, refuse to trust the power and wisdom of God's gospel – Christ crucified!

## 2. The educated

The response of the philosophical world was no different. The Greek mind cherished the intellects, the deep-thinkers of the world that could wax eloquent about God and life and morality and such. And who could blame them? As Gordon Fee points out, “Theirs were the advances of civilization as none before. Indeed, it was their very advances in learning that caused many to abandon the traditional gods and turn to *sophia*, or *philosophia*. Their idolatry was to conceive of God as ultimate Reason.” [NICNT: *First Corinthians*, 75] The major problem with this type of thinking is that *they* defined what was ultimate Reason and what was not. Everything was filtered through their views of God and man and morality. And it was according to this worldview that their thoughts of the cross were constructed.

With this in mind, we are not surprised that the Greek mind looked at the message of the cross as “**foolishness**” (v. 23). Paul’s message of “**Christ crucified**” was unthinkable and unreasonable to them. This type of treatment was reserved for criminals and was so treacherous that the Romans would not inflict it on their own citizens. How could a criminal play any part in the important details of life?

There is a great lesson here for those who preach the Word. We are not to preach to what men are looking for, we are to preach Christ crucified. The preacher must understand what Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 2:15-16, “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.” Paul “**preached** (proclaimed) **Christ crucified**,” he did not peddle Christ crucified or pander to what man was searching for.

## 3. The chosen

There is a third group that Paul addresses in this text, that of “**the called**” in verse 24. This group, unlike the religious man represented by the Jew or the wise or educated man represented by the Greek, was not asking or looking for anything. They simply believed. As we saw earlier, there are those that God, in His wisdom, chooses never to reveal Himself (v. 21). Conversely, there are those who God does choose to reveal Himself and that is this group, “**the called.**” We often refer to this group as the elect or chosen of God. There is an effectual call that a lost man will respond to by faith in Christ when ushered forth by the Sovereign God of creation. Paul further described the assurance found in this doctrine in Romans 8:28-31:

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”

When we discuss the doctrine of God’s election, or the chosen, or “**the called**” as Paul calls it here, there are two dangerous mindsets that can creep up among those who struggle with this doctrine.

### a. Danger of fatalism

The thought goes like this: “If God has His ‘frozen chosen’ then it does not matter what I do or don’t do with the gospel because God has already determined who will and will not come to faith in Christ.” However, this is a fatalistic mindset and one that is simply not Scriptural.

While it is true that God has determined who will and will not come to faith in Christ, we do not know who those people are. We are told to “Go, and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). We are to be His “witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). You see, we must understand that God has not only ordained *who* would come to faith in Christ but he has also ordained *how* one would come to faith in Christ, or the means by which one comes to Christ, and that is through the proclamation of the gospel by His gospel witnesses. This is the command for all who know Christ savingly. You cannot use the doctrine of election as an excuse not to share Christ crucified with the lost!

### **b. Danger of despair**

The second danger that often is manifest among those that do not understand God’s electing grace in salvation is that of despair. Again, the thought goes like this: “Since God has predetermined before the foundation of the world who would be saved, then the only thing I can do is sit here and hope that maybe he has chosen me.” Do you see the despair and hopelessness with this kind of thinking? However, this mindset is also does not come from Scripture. Man everywhere is commanded to “repent and believe.” Any failure to turn from sin in repentance and to faith in Christ is not the fault of God. It is rooted in man’s sinfulness. Again, you simply cannot use the doctrine of God’s election as an excuse not to come to faith in Christ. Don’t be fooled by the ignorance of those who misunderstand this doctrine and see it “as God bringing those who don’t want to be saved kicking and screaming down the aisle and rejecting those who really want to be saved because He has not chosen them.” Folks, that is heresy. Jesus Himself is very plain concerning this: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37). If you don’t know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then your hope to day is to cry out to Him for His grace and His mercy to save you.

### **Conclusion**

**“Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (v.25)**

How about you? Do you have just enough religion to be dangerous? Has your intellect carried you to the place where it carried Nietzsche, “God is dead,” even though you might not express that outwardly it is the attitude of your heart inwardly. May you be reminded this morning that the eternity of your soul is at stake. Will you follow the foolishness of the world, or will you trust in the power and wisdom of God in the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to save you from your sins. The only way that God’s wrath for sin and the judgment that awaits can be appeased is through the cross.